

# Sew Long & Sew Happy

## The Salmon Prom Dress

Serving up a delicious formal

VOL. 1  
JAN 2018

Feel Free to Compliment Me  
Aimee crushes this velour wrap dress

Diagnosis: NSFDS  
“New Stitcher Fancy Dress Syndrome”  
is real, we explore why

WWZD

Bead Storage, Safety Pins, Formal Dress Hems

# The Salmon Prom Dress

*This article is adapted from episode 76 of the “Sewing Out Loud” podcast: The Salmon Prom Dress. Zede and I took some time to analyze the salmon prom dress in detail to give you more insight into the design process, construction details, and found that there was even more juicy sewing goodness to share!*

## Occasion

Rock Bridge High School Prom 2005

## Fabric

Overlay is a semi-stiff, sheer home dec fabric with plastic/rubber silver dots. The lining is crepe-backed-satin cut on the bias.

## Silhouette

Backless, straight dress with plunging neckline.

## Construction

Bias-cut lining with ruched overlay, beaded straps, and an invisible zipper at back seam for closure.

Neckline finished with bias cut combed cotton strips. Interior seams are left unfinished.

Lining is unhemmed to allow for maximum stretch, and won't ravel due to being cut on the bias. The overlay is hemmed with a tiny hem.



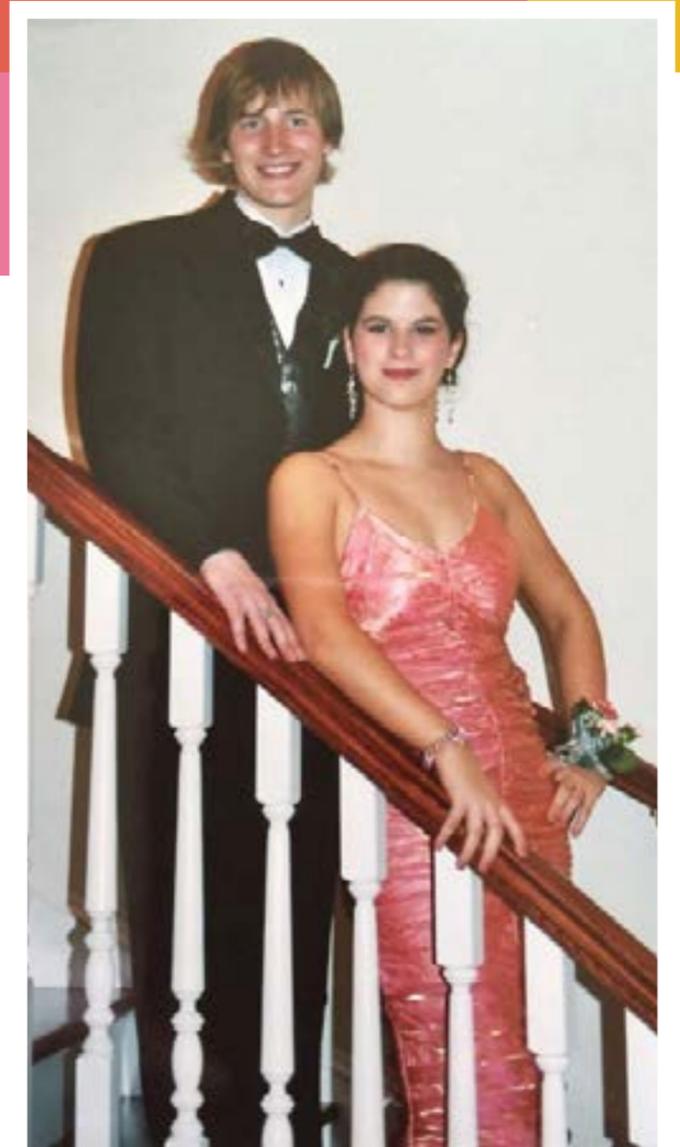
*Pic with the high-school boyfriend!  
Notice the “cupping” effect of the hem  
on the overlay*

**Zede:** People in the Self Sewn Wardrobe group often ask if it's “against the rules” to use home dec fabric for garments. I say “Hell, no!” I've used home dec fabric to make lots of clothes, and that's because the term “home dec” encompasses a wide variety of fabric weights and textures. This fabric is a sheer, semi-stiff fabric that could have been used for drapes or an overlay on a pillow.

Embellishments on fabrics, such as glass beads or sequins, can make sewing a challenge, but the little dots on this fabric are rubbery plastic, and posed no trouble for my machine.

**Mallory:** My entire life, I've wanted a waist and boobs. My sketchbooks are filled with color blocked garments with diagonal design lines that would give my straight shape some curves. I'm lucky to have a mom who can bring my little sketches to life.

This dress was supposed to lend me some “va-va-voom” with the ruching. We concentrated the ruching at the waist and then made it a bit looser up top to give the illusion of a fuller bust.



*Managing some “va-va-voom” with  
“Barely B” cup boobs*

# The Salmon Prom Dress

Z: I told Mallory she might not be able to walk in the dress due to the straight silhouette, but she said she was ok with that! I cut the entire garment on the bias to allow for some stretch. A prom dress (or any formal dress) is like a costume, and might not fit like your regular clothes. You may also use techniques that you wouldn't normally employ on an everyday garment- like my unfinished seams and unhemmed lining.

M: I had no idea how we would technically achieve the look I had sketched out. I think I knew about ruching, but I didn't know what sort of process we'd use to make an entirely ruched dress. Of course, mom came up with an idea pretty quickly.

Z: This dress is truly the result of draping. There was no pattern, and I used Mallory's body to define construction. We cut 4 lengths of the sheer fabric that were 2-2.5 times as long as the dress would be. Then I zig-zagged over a cord down the sides of the pieces.

Since the pieces were so long, we had to climb on the cutting table to gather up the fabric and distribute the ruching. As we progressed, it was clear that we were making something that looked like a salmon fillet! Something we didn't realize when we recorded the podcast is that the lining pieces are actually pieced together, I must have been making due with a limited amount of salmon-colored crepe-backed-satin.



*Pieced crepe-backed-satin lining cut on the bias*



*Zede's dart finishing technique*

M: I remember mom holding up the fabric to my body, so that we could make the ruching more concentrated at the waist on the front and back pieces.

The fabric was lightweight and held the ruching nicely, so it was easy to manipulate- sort of like a very durable, flexible paper.

Z: After we'd ruched the sheer fabric panels, we basted it to the crepe back satin lining. We then sandwiched the layers right sides together and sewed up the side seams and center front. We then wrapped the fabric around Mallory's body and pinned the back seam with safety pins to create a tube. Then we safety pinned the side and back seams to shape the dress. The back is very low, so it only needed to fit around the body at the waist and hips, then fall straight from there.

I marked a few "reference points" on her body, so I could cut the shape of the neckline and back. We took the dress off of her, folded it in half along the front seam, and cut the shape of the neckline and back. The back was so low, that it didn't require any further shaping other than at the seams. The top of the front was a bit trickier. I added a bust dart to the lining on the front of the dress, so that it would curve around Mallory's body. There is no dart in the overlay, it is simply attached to the lining. (We shared this dart technique in the November 2017 Zig-Zag live broadcast- public tutorial coming soon!)

# The Salmon Prom Dress

M: I paid absolutely zero attention to the finishing techniques used on this dress at the time- I was a bit more concerned with looking fabulous, but mom's ingenuity really shines here! When we recorded the podcast about this dress, I was delighted to see that the hem of the lining was left unfinished. Zede's explanation is this provides maximum movement in the hem, so that I could walk...I'll accept that. I'll also say that I must have subconsciously internalized the acceptable nature of unhemmed garments from this formative moment in my sewing life. The seams are unfinished as well, because- as Zede says in the podcast- "Mama ain't adding' no bulk!"



*Unfinished interior seams*



*The overlay hem tacked to the unfinished lining*

Z: The hem of the lining is unfinished (as Mallory pointed out), but the overlay is finished with a tiny hem. We left the overlay longer than the lining, so that the hem could cup under- this preserves the continuity of the ruching design element, whereas a straight-cut hem would not. In order to make sure the hem stayed in place and cupped nicely, I used a chain to

secure the two layers together at the seams and in two places between each seam. You can create little chain guides using the technique from the Lingerie Guides tutorial.

Z: The closure on this dress is an invisible zipper in the back seam. You know what hides an invisible zipper really well? Ruching with shiny fabric!

The zipper isn't long at all (about 9 inches), because the dress is backless. 'Mallory just needed to be able to get the skirt over her hips.



M: The dress is on the bias and very form-fitting, so there's a bit of a "Chinese handcuff" effect. Getting dressed required some shimmying and shaking.

We worked with a costumer once who quipped, "The only thing you can wear under that kind of dress is shoes!"

Lucky for me (since I like to wear panties), the ruching provided some texture and coverage. I didn't have to wear a bra though!

*The invisible zipper closure in the back seam*

# The Salmon Prom Dress



*Bra cups for shape and support*

Z: Mallory is the only one of my three daughters that I have to “make boobs for.” We tacked in bra cups to the bodice to give the dress more shape. You can use all sorts of things to pad out a silhouette. Don’t hesitate to use some “help” to get the look you want, especially on a night when you want to look gorgeous.

I also made Mallory’s best friend’s dress that year. She’s busty, and I made sure to add in lingerie guides to her straps, so that she could wear a regular bra with her dress. It was the two opposite ends of the boob spectrum!

To finish the neckline, I used bias-cut combed cotton strips and applied them to the right side of the dress with the sewing machine, then flipped them over, and then hand stitched them to the lining.



*The neckline is one of the only “finished” areas on the dress*



*Beaded straps. Bead Libraries are just as important as fabric libraries*

M: The beaded straps were mom’s idea, and she suggested (rather firmly) that I make them while she worked on the rest of the dress. I used no. 8 perle cotton and strung two identical straps using beads from our stash- I mean, “Bead Library.” The beaded straps were surprisingly comfortable, and provided some sparkle. I didn’t wear a necklace with the dress.

Z: Even though this dress wouldn’t be worn often, I wanted to make sure it could last. We added hanging straps, so that the dress would not have to hang on the beaded straps- which could have been a disastrous situation. We stored this dress on a padded hanger, and crossed the hanging straps over the neck of the hanger. The beaded straps rested the hanger’s padded shoulders, and the ribbons bore the weight. This dress is made almost entirely of polyester, so it’s going to be around for a long time if it’s stored in a well-ventilated, dry place- away from direct sunlight.

-Zede Donohue & Mallory Donohue

# #FFTCM

## (Feel Free to Compliment Me)

At SewHere.com, we firmly believe in owning your wins!

This month, we're feeling free to compliment Aimee Ledwell.

Her pink crushed velvet dress took our breath away when she posted it in the Self Sewn Wardrobe Facebook Group.



Photo by Joshua Ledwell

### *From Aimee...*

Early this Fall, I saw a lovely ballet-pink crushed velvet wrap dress in a popular ready-to-wear plus-size catalog. I instantly fell in love, but balked at the \$65 price tag.

As a plus-sized fashionista, I know off-rack rarely fits well enough to be worth it. This is part of why I sew my own clothes.

I searched for a pattern, but none seemed right. In October, I found the perfect silky Rose Crush velvet, and it lingered in my stash for about 6 weeks! Finally, I saw the call for testers for the Wanda Wrap Dress by Wardrobe by Me in mid-November.

Aside from adding length to the ties and subtracting length from the hemline, I was pleased with the fit of my double-brushed poly muslin.

I then held my breath as I cut into my precious velvet- which was smart, because there are still little pink hairs everywhere in my studio. The fabric is so slippery, I used all 50 of my knock-off wonderclips!

I couldn't be more delighted with how this dress came out, I have found two excuses to wear it already. Now I want to sew all the velvet!

*Aimee lives in Maynard, MA with her husband and son, you can find out more about her antics at [www.aimeeledwell.com](http://www.aimeeledwell.com)*

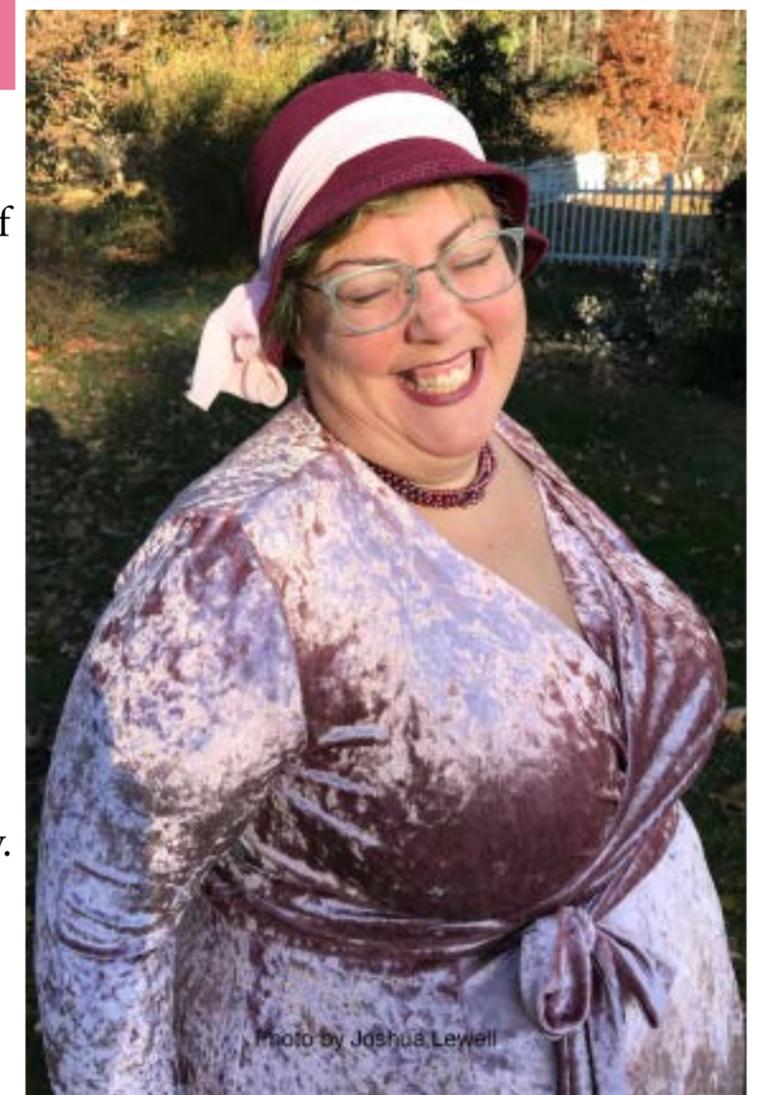


Photo by Joshua Ledwell

### Why We're Complimenting Aimee:

Wrap dresses are notoriously hard to fit, and we love how Aimee's dress fits perfectly in the shoulders, and her wrap crosses over at the correct point on her bust. Each half of the wrap top covers one breast, and goes underneath the other breast. Plus, her styling and lip-color are on point!

*(photos courtesy of Joshua Ledwell)*

# Diagnosis: NSFDS

## “New Stitcher Fancy Dress Syndrome”

In the early days of the Self Sewn Wardrobe Facebook group, we shared projects with an intimate group of 150-200 people, as opposed to the present environment of 11,000 stitchers. During this time, many of our members admitted that when they started sewing, they immediately jumped into dizzyingly complex outfits- dresses in particular. This gave rise to the term “New Sewer Fancy Dress Syndrome”. For editorial purposes, I re-named this diagnosis, “New Stitcher Fancy Dress Syndrome”, lest we imagine an excrement covered silk ball gown while discussing the topic.

The problem with NSFDS is that formals often demand some of the most intricate and challenging sewing techniques imaginable. Not only is fit is paramount (it’s all about presentation) but the pretty, shiny fabrics of our dreams can be slippery and difficult to work with.

As a former sewing store manager, I remember several phone calls like this:

*“Hello, I’m getting married soon, and I’d like to make my wedding dress. How much would it cost for someone to teach me?”*

After a silent eye roll and a deep breath, I’d try to explain why this wasn’t possible- and wasn’t a good idea. The client probably meant well, and I didn’t want to crush anyone’s dreams, but I figured crushing the dream at that moment was better than the dream being crushed when the dress wasn’t finished or didn’t fit the night before the wedding.

Why are we so attracted to the idea of creating a garment that we’ll wear once or twice? Is it because we are so removed from the idea of sewing our everyday clothing? Does an upcoming occasion inspire a sudden desire to learn to sew? Do people just really want to save money?

That last reason was often the motivation behind the phone call. People thought that if we “taught them” how to take a wedding dress from a size 18 to a size 4 (or 24), it would cost less than what they’d been quoted. We were often asked to perform impossible tasks, and the requests became infuriating when people balked at the cost of our time and mocked the value of our skills.

Enter the Facebook group. The internet is often terrible, but throwing our net wide helped to catch some of the sweetest sewing souls in the world. People who came by “New Stitcher Fancy Dress Syndrome” honestly and could reflect upon it hilariously.

When we learn that our sewing dreams can come true, our minds don’t go to basic T-shirts, but instead to the prom dresses and formals of our dreams. Dresses that would accompany weddings to our perfect partners or our Oscar’s acceptance speeches. I hazard to guess that most stitchers would attempt a corseted formal dress before attempting a pair of jeans.

Since we’ve focused our business and closed our brick-and-mortar store, I can smile at this phenomenon with newfound perspective. The people who make it to the other side of NSFDS are better for it. They might not have created a wearable product (or maybe they did!), but they have a unique appreciation for sewing from the very beginning of their creative journeys.

If you’ve suffered from NSFDS, I hope you were able to recover gracefully, and that you feel empowered by your efforts. You can rest assured, I’m proud and impressed, and I can’t wait to see what you make next!

-Mallory Donohue  
January, 2018

# WWZD: What Would Zede Do?

Tips and insights from the master

## Safety Pins for Fit and Alterations

I recommend using safety pins for marking alterations on ready to wear, self sewn, or partially self sewn garments. Always try on your garment right sides out and mark the fit with safety pins. Safety pins won't shift or fall out, and this can be important on slippery fabric or in a situation where you have to transport a garment. I learned that from theatrical production fittings!

## Formal Dress Hems

When you see celebrities on the red carpet, their dress hems are long and puddled for photo ops. If you're making a dress that will truly be worn and walked (or danced) in, then be safe and make the hem short enough to avoid any spills down the aisle or dance floor. Remember, hems can be shorter in front, and lower on the sides and back. When marking a hem like this, try the garment on the wearer, and pin the hem up in front high enough so that they can walk easily, and then curve the hem toward the floor at the sides and back to preserve that luxurious puddling. Remember, those celebs wear a different dress to the after-parties!

## Bead Storage

I struggled to organize my vast assortment of beads—we have thousands! I'd settled on using a deluxe tackle box with smaller tackle boxes inside, and when my husband saw this, he commented, "That's a pretty expensive tackle box just to store beads!" He obviously doesn't know how much Swarovski crystals cost. When I requested better bead storage for Christmas, he suggested drawers, but I wanted to be able to transport my beads to work or rehearsals. The smaller tackle boxes worked great for that. He ended up making this tower that allows my tackle boxes to act as drawers, keeping my beads organized and portable.

Bonus: the tower is on casters, so I can move it around my studio easily.



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